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In Dangerous Waters: On Language, Freedom, and Education

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There are many things to be said in favor of the argument presented in the essay, “The Drama of the Leap: Kaspar Hauser Exits the Cave,” as well as many critical points to be raised. As an illustration of the last matter, I do not agree with the one-sided presentation of Immanuel Kant’s ideas on education in the essay. It is said that Kant positions the newborn child amongst the animals and that he defines education as a gradual process of rooting out the merely biological side of human life. Yet, Kant is also famous for formulating what is known as the pedagogical paradox: we can only help children in becoming autonomous beings if we assume that they already possess a *minimal* degree of freedom. Animals, for this reason, cannot be educated, only trained.¹ This is clearly reflected by the different ways in which we deal with children when reprimanding or punishing them, as opposed to the ways in which we discipline animals. Therefore, Kant is well aware of the fact that *from the very beginning*, there is a tension within every human being between freedom and necessity, between culture and nature. I would say that this is not sufficiently reflected in the essay.

On the other hand, the essay is most successful in giving an original twist to the old Kantian problem. I believe the author is correct in pointing out, in the first three schemes she discusses, that we — as heirs to Kant and the Enlightenment — usually regard freedom as an end goal, and therefore run the risk of turning education into an instrument for attaining this objective. What the essay shows is that freedom could also be seen as the name of education itself. Or, at least, that is the way I have understood the fourth scheme. This is also to say that, rather than overcoming the tensions as described by Kant, education is precisely about accepting and working through these tensions — even about remaining in the center of these tensions. Education doesn’t happen as the result of passing over from childhood to adulthood. Instead, education happens in the moment of passing over *itself*.

In order to substantiate this claim, the essay uses a most commendable approach, namely, it constructs an argument on the basis of a discussion of, let’s call it, a case study. Indeed, Kaspar Hauser offers an excellent starting point for thinking about the ways in which learning how to speak isn’t just one skill one needs to master in addition to other skills, but is absolutely essential to what it means to become an educated being. An analysis of the elementary gestures of leaping and leaving, as we see these happening in the protagonist’s endeavor with becoming a speaking human being, brings out profound insights about the issue of freedom in education. This is to say that, even if Kaspar’s case is most uncommon, it reveals something about all of us. More adequately put, because of its exceptionality (receiving his first education at an adult age), Kaspar renders things visible in a much clearer and articulate way than a mere reflection on our own education ever could. The basic idea here is that most of us, because we are fluent in our mother tongue, tend to

disregard the fact that, even as grown-ups, every word we utter is a struggle with language. And so we might easily miss the fact that it is this never-ending process of entering into language that transforms us into beings of possibility, into creatures that can truly begin anew.

Now, the force of this argument is that it remains at a descriptive level and that it relies on the use of Werner Herzog's outstanding portrayal of Kaspar Hauser's leapings and leavings. Thus, we can come to recognize that we are *all* Kaspar, by comparing our own experiences with the analysis offered. In this sense, the approach displayed in the essay could be rightfully called *phenomenological*. Nonetheless, this descriptive perspective is crossed by other purposes that I would call *normative* and *ontological*. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that the text relies too much on the *story* of Kaspar's life, by which I mean that, at different places in the essay, particular narrative elements are taken as indicative for what education should and should not be. I refer here more specifically to the clash between what the citizens of Nuremberg had expected (namely, Kaspar writing an authentic and complete life story) and his failure to do so, which resulted in his most infelicitous death. This abrupt and unprosperous turn is then indicative of a shortcoming, identified as a "hopeless nihilism and skepticism." There is, otherwise stated, something that is lacking in his story. Kaspar's biography is judged normatively as incomplete, and, therefore, it is the ambition of the essay to fill the gap and to come up with a better account. In order to do so, the author draws from Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Nancy. More precisely, she advocates an ontological account that does not regard freedom as an attribute of humankind. Instead, humanity is defined as an attribute of freedom. We become free only by giving the right answer to a groundless ground, to a play of disclosure and concealing that radically precedes us.

The difficulty I have with this is that Kaspar Hauser is being reduced to an object of evaluation. His life can be either a good example or a bad one, or perhaps both. Pointing out what is deficient about his story, Kaspar runs the risk of becoming an individual and a problematic case, which, like a medical case, can be evaluated in view of an ideal of the healthy, the desirable. In a sense, this comes down to not taking his case seriously. Moreover, this evaluation is supported by an ontology that, although I am not unsympathetic to it myself, might not convince others. However, such an ontological grounding, even if it involves a groundless ground, may not be necessary at all in order to show that Kaspar Hauser is of great relevance for educationalists. My advice is to remain at a purely descriptive, that is, phenomenological level, and more precisely to develop a precise, rich, and convincing account of how freedom in education is related to becoming a linguistic being, and to the leaping and leaving that is involved here.

I would like to suggest adding another figure here, and another gesture to leaping and leaving, namely, *swimming*. If this sounds odd at first, I refer here to a book by the French philosopher Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, in which he presents education as a risky voyage from the familiar to the strange with the help of the figure of a swimmer who crosses a large distance from one shore to the other.² He compares the true educational moment with what this swimmer experiences right

in the midst of crossing over (rather than when the swimmer reaches the other side). I quote here from Serres: “After having left the shore behind, for a while you stay much closer to it than the one on the other side, at least just enough so that the body starts reckoning and says to itself, silently, that it can always go back ... You have not really left.” During the second half of the journey, there comes a moment when “your foot ... waits expectantly for the approach: you find yourself close enough to the steep bank to say you have arrived.” Even if you haven’t actually arrived, you have at least the feeling of arriving. However, “right bank or left bank, what does it matter, in both cases it is land or ground.”³ The most interesting moment is somewhere in between departing and arriving, a moment that is difficult to define, but which you must necessarily experience: “The real passage occurs in the middle,” that is, when “the ground is missing [and] any sense of belonging, of support is gone,”⁴ when you find yourself in dangerous waters.

This metaphor perceptively captures, I would say, what it means to define education-as-freedom in the sense of being entirely without destination. Even if it is difficult to forego a language of processes that go from one fixed point to another whenever one speaks about education, this transformation is — at a deeper level — dependent upon an undefined and (perhaps) unsettling place somewhere *in between* where one is neither departing nor arriving, and where the student witnesses, temporarily, a moment of *disorientation*. But, this sense of disorientation shouldn’t be regarded as negative, that is, as something to be regretted or to be against in view of the safety that both shores offered. Rather, it should be taken in a wholly positive sense: as an experience of ability that is not as yet determined and that forms the basis of our educability, of our very potentiality to be educated, to begin anew.

1. Immanuel Kant, “Lectures on Pedagogy (1803),” in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, eds. Gunter Zoller and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2. Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*